

Maybe she is just what they want me to be
You're a mess, tangled with your confidence
You think you haven't sinned
Well, you're unstoppable
Your walls are impassible.

william

The door clicked shut behind Est, and the sound echoed through the apartment like a gunshot.

He is gone.

I stood there, frozen, my hand still on the doorknob, listening to his footsteps fade down the hallway. The silence that rushed in to fill the space he'd occupied was deafening. The air still smelled like him—that mix of rain and something uniquely Est, something warm and human.

I closed my eyes, and my lips tingled. I touched them with my fingertips, a ghost of a sensation. He had kissed me. I had kissed him. And it hadn't been a mistake. It hadn't been a panic attack. It had been... inevitable.

"Text me when you get home."

"I will."

I wanted to text him right now. I wanted to type: I miss you already. Please come back.

And I already miss him so violently it scares me.

I can still taste jasmine tea on my tongue. I can still feel the ghost-pressure of his mouth against mine, the way he leaned in like it was the easiest thing in the world, like kissing me was something he'd been waiting to do for years. I can still feel his fingers curled into the fabric at my waist, anchoring me to the moment so completely that for the first time in three years the world didn't feel like it was trying to spin me off its surface.

I hate how much I want him back already.

I hate how the wanting feels like standing on the edge of the balcony thirty-eight floors up, dizzy with height and terror and exhilaration. I hate that I'm terrified he'll change his mind tomorrow and decide I'm too much work. I hate that I'm terrified he won't.

My pulse is too loud in my ears.

My apartment—my sanctuary, my fortress—suddenly felt cavernous. Empty in a way it hadn't before.

I released the doorknob slowly, my fingers aching from gripping it too hard. The living room stretched out before me: the plush rug where we'd sat, the two mugs still resting on the coffee table, the black-and-white film frozen on the TV screen. The flowers Lego had brought—sunflowers, irises, poppies—sat in their jar on the kitchen counter, bright and accusing.

It was a disaster zone of my own making.

Two mugs on the coffee table—one with the dregs of jasmine tea, gone cold and the other empty, except for a faint ring at the bottom. The TV paused on a black-and-white frame of a man crying. And on the kitchen counter, the jar. I walked over to the mugs, I picked it up, turning it over in my hands like it might hold some clue, some answer to the question I didn't know how to ask.

What just happened?

Or maybe: What have I done?

Or maybe: What am I becoming?

My chest felt tight, overfull. Like I'd swallowed too much air and couldn't release it. The apartment pressed in around me—too warm, too bright, too much. The hum of the refrigerator was suddenly unbearably loud. The light from the city outside was too sharp, slicing through the windows in geometric patterns that hurt my eyes. My brain was buzzing, a hive of bees trapped in a jar. Every nerve ending felt raw, exposed. The lights of the city outside seemed too bright. I was overstimulated, overfull, overflowing.

I set the mug down with a trembling hand and pressed my palms against the cool countertop, trying to ground myself, my socks sliding on the polished floor, and looked at the living room.

Est was here.

Est, who had looked at me like I was something more than broken. Who had sat on my floor and talked about pain and abandonment without flinching. Who had smiled when I woke up, instead of recoiling.

Est, who I'd kissed.

My face burned at the memory. The tentative press of his lips, the warmth of his

hands on my waist, the way he'd leaned in without hesitation, like kissing me was the most natural thing in the world.

"I really want to see you again, Est."

"I want that too, William. Very, very soon."

The memory should have made me happy. It did make me happy, in a terrifying, overwhelming way that felt like standing at the edge of a cliff.

But underneath the happiness was something else. Something sharp and cold.

Guilt.

The sunflowers. The irises. The poppies. They were so bright they hurt to look at.

My stomach twisted. Lego.

I turned away from the counter and my eyes landed on my phone, abandoned on the dining table. The screen was dark, but I could feel its weight from across the room.

Slowly, reluctantly, I walked over and picked it up.

The screen lit up.

12 Unread Messages.

My stomach dropped.

I unlocked the phone with shaking fingers.

Lego: Hey! Found that pigment you wanted! The tiny shop finally restocked!

Lego: Saw a painting at the gallery today. Reminded me of your blue period but with more light. You'd love it.

Lego: Client wants peace lilies for a memorial. Thought of your mom. Hope you're doing okay.

Lego: William?

Lego: Did I do something wrong?

Lego: I'm sorry if I bothered you. Just worried.

Lego: Please let me know you're okay.

Lego: Bringing flowers Wednesday as usual. Let me know if you need anything.

Lego: Still no answer. Getting worried now.

Lego: Okay, I'm just going to assume you're busy. See you Wednesday?

Lego: On my way over!

Lego: Sorry for interrupting. Hope you had fun.

The last message was timestamped forty-three minutes ago.

I stared at the screen until the words blurred. I sank into the dining chair, the phone trembling in my hand.

Twelve messages. Twelve attempts to reach me. Twelve moments where Lego had extended a hand, and I'd... what? Ignored them? Forgotten?

No. Not forgotten. I'd seen the messages. I'd read them, felt the faint tug of obligation, and then... set the phone down. Told myself I'd reply later. Told myself Lego would understand. Told myself I was busy, I was figuring things out, I needed space. And I had swiped them away. Later, I had thought. I'll reply later. Lego will understand. Lego is fine. I had treated him like background noise. Like furniture. Like the sun would rise and set on Lego, so I didn't have to worry about him.

But I hadn't needed space from Lego.

I'd just been so wrapped up in Est—in the texting, the calls, the nervous anticipation of seeing him again—that everything else had faded into background noise.

Including Lego.

Lego, who had been there every single Wednesday for three years.

Lego, who had sat outside my door with flowers when I wouldn't let anyone in.

Lego, who knew my coffee order, my favorite films, the exact shade of blue I used when I was painting grief.

Lego, who I had dismissed tonight like an inconvenience.

"I'm... busy right now. Can we reschedule?"

The words echoed in my head, and I flinched.

God. I had said that. I had looked him in the eye—those eyes that had looked at me with nothing but adoration for three years—and I had told him to go away because I wanted to be alone with a boy. I dropped my head into my hands, groaning. The guilt was a physical weight, a stone sitting on my chest.

I could still see the way Lego's smile had faltered. The way their eyes had flickered

between me and Est, bright and confused and hurt. The way they'd backed toward the door with forced cheer, like they were trying to make themselves smaller, less obtrusive. The way he backed toward the door, voice too bright, too careful.

"Well, it was really nice to meet you, P'Est. I hope you two have fun."

I sank onto the dining chair, the phone heavy in my hand.

What would my mother think?

The thought came unbidden, sharp and painful.

She would have been furious. Not in a loud, angry way—she never yelled—but in that quiet, disappointed way that was somehow worse.

"William." she would have said, her voice gentle but firm, "Lego has been nothing but kind to you. And you repay that kindness by shutting them out?"

I could almost hear her, almost see the way she would tilt her head, the way her eyes would soften even as she delivered the reprimand.

"You're allowed to have new people in your life, sweet boy. But that doesn't mean you abandon the ones who've been there all along. You're better than that. I raised you to be better than that."

She'd be disappointed. Not angry—she never got angry—just deeply, achingly disappointed. She had raised me to be better than this. She had raised me to value people, not use them until something shinier came along.

The guilt twisted deeper, a knife between my ribs.

I knew better. I'd been raised to be kind, to treat people well. My mother had spent my entire childhood gently correcting me, teaching me that people weren't disposable, that relationships required care and attention.

And yet here I was, repeating the same patterns I'd resented in my father.

My father, who had replaced my mother before her body was even cold. Who had moved a stranger into her house, her garden, and acted like the past could be erased with new paint and new furniture.

I wasn't replacing Lego. I wasn't. But I had treated them like they were... secondary. Like their feelings didn't matter as much as my own excitement, my own new, fragile thing with Est.

I set the phone down and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

The apartment was too quiet. The silence pressed against my eardrums, a physical weight.

My skin felt too tight. My brain was firing too fast. Est. Lego. Mom. The show. The emails. The guilt. The kiss. I needed to move. I needed to make it stop.

I stood abruptly, needing to move, needing to do something before the guilt and the overstimulation pulled me under entirely. My eyes swept the living room, looking for an anchor, and landed on my laptop. I walked over, flipped it open, and waited for it to boot up.

The screen lit up, and I was immediately assaulted by notifications.

47 Unread Emails.

I stared at the number, my stomach sinking further.

I clicked on the inbox.

The emails were a chaotic mix: updates from the café managers, questions about menu changes, vendor invoices, staffing issues. Requests for approval on new hires. Complaints about broken equipment. And then, buried in the middle:

Subject: Flower Shop - Urgent: Supplier Issue

Subject: RE: Monthly Financial Report - Cafés

Subject: REMINDER: Gallery Exhibition Deadline - 3 Months

I clicked on the last one, my hands trembling.

> Dear Mr. Jakrapatr.

> This is a friendly reminder that your solo exhibition, "Absence and Light," is scheduled to open in three months at the Siam Contemporary Gallery. We're excited to showcase your work and have confirmed the space for 15-20 pieces.

> Per our last conversation, we'll need the completed works delivered no later than six weeks prior to the opening for curation and installation. Please confirm receipt of this email and provide an update on your progress.

> Best regards,

> Curator, Siam Contemporary Gallery.

Three months.

Fifteen to twenty pieces.

I closed my eyes, my breath coming in short, shallow bursts.

I had three finished paintings. Maybe four, if I counted the one I'd covered with a sheet because I couldn't stand to look at it anymore.

The rest were sketches. Ideas. Blank canvases stacked against the wall, mocking me.

I'd been so consumed by my own isolation, my own fear, that I'd let everything pile up around me. The cafés, the flower shop, the gallery, the work—all of it ignored, pushed aside, justified with the excuse that I couldn't handle it, that I needed to protect myself, that the world was too much.

But the truth was, I hadn't been protecting myself.

I'd been hiding.

And in the process, I'd neglected everything. The businesses my mother had built. The legacy she'd left me. The people who depended on me—managers, employees, Lego.

And my art. The one thing that was supposed to be mine, the one thing I could control.

I stood up abruptly, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. The sound grated against my overstimulated nerves, and I flinched.

I walked to the studio door, my heart pounding. I pushed it open.

The scent of turpentine and oil paint hit me immediately, sharp and familiar. The studio was a controlled chaos: canvases leaning against the walls, paint tubes scattered across the worktable, brushes soaking in jars of cloudy water. And in the corner, covered with a cloth, the painting I'd been avoiding for weeks.

I walked over and yanked the cloth off.

It was a mess.

Dark blues and grays, slashed with white, a hollow black figure at the center. My mother. My father. Myself. All of it tangled together in a knot of grief I couldn't untangle.

I stared at it, my chest tight.

This was supposed to be for the exhibition. This was supposed to be the centerpiece, the culmination of everything I'd been feeling for the past three years.

But I couldn't finish it. Every time I picked up a brush, the weight of it crushed me.

I turned away, my eyes landing on the flowers Lego had brought.

Sunflowers. Irises. Poppies.

Bright, vibrant, alive.

I walked over to the jar, lifting it carefully. The flowers were still fresh, their petals soft and fragrant. Lego had arranged them with care, balancing the colors, the heights, the shapes.

They were beautiful.

I carried them into the studio and set them on the worktable, angling them so the light from the window caught the edges of the petals.

Then I grabbed a fresh canvas—a smaller one, more manageable—and propped it on the easel.

I picked up a palette, squeezing out paint: cadmium yellow, burnt sienna, cobalt violet, viridian green. Bright, saturated colors that felt almost aggressive after months of muted grays and blues.

I didn't sketch first. I didn't plan.

I just started painting.

The brush moved across the canvas in broad, sweeping strokes. Yellow for the sunflowers, thick and textured. Purple for the irises, layered and deep. Red for the poppies, sharp and vivid.

I didn't try to make it realistic. I didn't try to make it perfect.

I just let the colors bleed into each other, let the shapes form and dissolve, let the energy of the flowers translate into something raw and uncontrolled. The overstimulation that had been clawing at me—the guilt, the anxiety, the weight of everything I'd been avoiding—poured out through the brush.

The painting became a riot of color and movement, chaotic and alive.

It wasn't beautiful in the way Lego's arrangements were beautiful. It wasn't careful or composed.

But it was honest.

I worked until my hands ached, until the light outside shifted from the blue of evening to the deep indigo of night.

When I finally stepped back, the canvas was covered in bold, clashing colors. The flowers were barely recognizable as flowers—they were more like feelings, like the idea of brightness and hope and guilt and longing all tangled together.

I set the brush down, my hands trembling.

The studio was silent except for the faint hum of the city outside.

I looked at the painting, then at the flowers, then back at the painting. It wasn't finished. It was messy, unrefined, chaotic.

But it was a start.

I picked up my phone, my fingers hovering over Lego's name in my contacts.

I typed:

Me: I'm sorry.

I stared at the message for a long moment. It felt inadequate. Too small for the weight of what I needed to say.

I deleted it and tried again:

Me: I'm sorry I didn't answer your messages. I'm sorry I dismissed you tonight. You didn't deserve that. You've never deserved that.

I paused, then added:

Me: I painted your flowers. They're beautiful. You're beautiful. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you that. I didn't answer because I was scared. Not of you. Of me. I'm so sorry, Lego. I treated you like an option, and you're my favorite person in the world. Please don't hate me.

I hit send before I could second-guess it.

The message sat there, marked as Delivered, and I waited.

One minute. Two. No response.

I set the phone down, my chest tight again.

Maybe Lego was asleep. Maybe they were angry. Maybe they were done with me, finally fed up with my inability to be a decent friend. I wouldn't blame them.

I walked back to the canvas, staring at the chaotic burst of color.

What would my mother think?

The question lingered, heavy and sharp.

She would tell me to apologize properly. To show up, not just with words, but with action. To stop hiding behind my fear and do the hard, uncomfortable work of being present. She would tell me that loving people—any people, friends or otherwise—meant making space for them even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard.

I looked at the flowers again, their vibrant colors softened by the dim studio light.

Lego had brought them every Wednesday for three years. Rain or shine, busy or tired, they had shown up. And tonight, I had shut the door in their face.

The guilt settled over me like a heavy blanket, suffocating and inescapable. But underneath it, faint and fragile, was something else.

A determination.

I would fix this. I didn't know how, but I would. I would finish the paintings. I would answer the emails. I would stop hiding from the businesses my mother had left me, from the responsibilities I'd been avoiding.

And I would make things right with Lego.

Because they deserved that. They deserved more than my half-hearted apologies and my careless neglect. They deserved a friend who showed up.

I picked up my phone again, opened a new message of Est:

Est: I made it home. Thank you for tonight. For everything.

Then I opened the laptop and started sorting through the emails, one by one, forcing myself to focus even as my overstimulated brain screamed for rest. The cafés. The flower shop. The gallery.

The life I'd been neglecting while I hid from the world. It was time to stop hiding.

Hours later, when the sky outside had turned from indigo to the pale gray of pre-dawn, I finally collapsed onto the couch.

My phone buzzed. I grabbed it, my heart leaping.

Lego: It's okay. I'm okay. Get some sleep, William. We'll talk soon.

I stared at the message, relief and guilt warring in my chest.

It's okay.

But it wasn't. Not really. And I wouldn't let it stay that way.

I was tired. I was a mess.

I set the phone down, closed my eyes, and let the exhaustion finally pull me under. The last thing I saw before sleep claimed me was the painting of Lego's flowers, chaotic and bright, a reminder of everything I still needed to do. And I didn't feel hopeless. I felt... determined.